

# FARMINGTON POLICE DEPARTMENT

## POLICY AND PROCEDURE



**Policy Number:**  
241-18

**Effective Date:**  
04/09/2018

**Subject:**  
Death Notifications

**Approved by:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S.D. Hebbe".

**Steven D. Hebbe, Chief of Police**



### PURPOSE:

To provide professional and courteous care when notifying a citizen of the death of a family member.

### POLICY:

It is the policy of the Farmington Police Department to exercise the utmost compassion while following established guidelines when notifying a citizen of the death of a family member. The emotional and traumatizing nature of death notifications is complicated and the manner in which it is conducted may have lasting impacts on the ability of those affected to recover from their loss in a healthy manner.

Law enforcement officers are normally the first professionals contacting a person upon the death of their loved one. This process must be done professionally and courteously in order to best assist the person being notified in responding to the loss of a loved one, as well as providing to them a positive perception of the investigative abilities and compassionate spirit of Farmington Police Department.

### PROCEDURE:

This policy is in compliance within the standard procedures submitted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Farmington Police Department Patrol Operations Policy 241-02.

A patrol supervisor or detective supervisor should make all death notifications when possible. In the event that circumstances prevent the supervisor from performing the death notification, the supervisor should carefully select the officer or officers assigned to conduct the notification.

Any non-supervisory police officer (patrol, detective, or specialized) may make a death notification as assigned by the supervisor, however it is recommended that only those officers trained in making such notifications be assigned the responsibility.

Upon commencing a death investigation, one of the investigation's priorities is to determine the existence and whereabouts of the deceased's living next of kin: spouse, parent / guardian, children, siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc. Attempts to notify the closest next of kin are to be made in a timely manner in order to best facilitate the next of kin being notified in a way best suited to not additionally traumatize the family of the deceased.

If the next of kin is not immediately known, research through the San Juan County Communications Authority or through the San Juan County Detention Center records should be considered as a potential reliable source of next of kin information. Other ways to locate the next of kin are through the decedent's cellular phone, address book, miscellaneous papers, etc...

Considerations to be made when responding to a location to make a death notification or in the preparation of a teletype requesting assistance in performing a death notification are:

- The age of the next of kin;
- Health risks and disabilities;
- Potential violent reactions;
- Weapons;
- Relatives and children present;
- The health risks and disabilities of the relatives and children;
- The nature and role of, if any, law enforcement's participation in the cause of death;
- Any other information leading to the possibility that the next of kin could react badly to the news.

When the next of kin lives out of state or in another jurisdiction other than San Juan County, the assigned officer should still ensure the proper notification is made to the next of kin through the assistance of the law enforcement agencies in the jurisdiction in which the next of kin resides. The assigned officer obtains as much identifying information as possible regarding the next of kin, including, but not limited to, the next of kin's full names, phone number, address, place of employment, etc.. Once this information is obtained, and with the assistance of the San Juan County Combined Communications Authority, the officer transmits via teletype the necessary information to the appropriate law enforcement agency, thereby ensuring a proper death notification is made to the next of kin.

The teletype should include the decedent's full name, date of birth, physical description, address and the investigating officer's identification along with a reliable phone number. The teletype needs to also include instructions for the next of kin to contact the investigating officer for additional information.

When the notification is made by the Farmington Police Department, for reasons of officer safety and convenience, it is recommended, when possible, that an officer is accompanied by at least one other officer and a chaplain or other qualified clergy member to perform the death notification. It is recommended that a minimum of two vehicles are utilized when traveling to the location of the next of kin. This is done so that the Chaplain or other clergy may remain with the next of kin, as needed, after the notification has been made and to provide for the reasonable transportation needs for the next of kin as required by the circumstances surrounding the event. A representative of the Department, either an officer or the Chaplain, should remain with the next of kin until such time as an additional family member, friend, or personal clergy arrives to provide assistance to the next of kin.

Barring extreme circumstances, death notifications should NEVER be conducted over the telephone. Only the Patrol Operations Captain or his or her designee shall approve any attempt to conduct a death notification by

telephone.

Telephonic death notifications are, by their impersonal nature, disrespectful and lacking credibility – A person being notified of a traumatic event may typically not believe the notification to be factual at first. If the notification is done over the phone, the next of kin may believe themselves to be the victim of a cruel joke. A notification made by a police officer in uniform or other appropriate attire offers professionalism and believability.

Death notifications should not be conducted on a doorstep. The officer should ask the next of kin for permission to speak with them inside the residence or building. If the notification is going to be made in a public place, every effort should be made to move the next of kin to a private room or secluded area.

When a notification is made, it is imperative the officer positively identifies the next of kin by verifying the next of kin's name and relationship to the decedent.

Have the person sit down if possible. If they are elderly or have potential health risks, consider having EMS personnel on standby prior to the notification. Ask the next of kin if there is anyone immediately available, who they would like to be present prior to the notification; however, undue delays in notifying the next of kin may further traumatize them.

When the notification is made, tell the next of kin that, "[decedent's name] is dead" or "has died." Do not use euphemisms such as, "[decedent's name] has passed away," or has "gone to a better place," or "is no longer with us," etc...The notification needs to be clearly and directly stated.

After the notification is made, wait for their initial reaction and once the initial shock has passed, then give the next of kin the reasonably appropriate details of the cause and manner of death, where such information is available.

- Cause of Death: stabbing, shooting, heart attack, blunt force trauma, asphyxiation, etc...
- Manner of Death: homicide or natural death, accidental, suicide, or undetermined etc...

Give the name of the detective, if any, assigned to the case.

Whether a notification is made in person or the officer is speaking to the next of kin over the phone immediately after a notification, condolences should be offered to them on behalf of the Farmington Police Department. A phrase such as, "On behalf of the Farmington Police Department, I express my condolences to you and your family". A sincere expression of compassion is very important and powerful. It gives a sense of professionalism and competency during the investigation of the death of their loved one.

The Chief of Police requests to be notified of all death notifications. Notification (of the Chief) can be made via e-mail and should include the name of the decedent and the name and mailing address of the relative notified.

### **In cases in which the death occurred within the State of New Mexico:**

Details may be given as to the nature of the death as appropriate. The officer will also provide the next of kin

with a name and phone number for the Field Deputy Investigator with the Office of the Medical Investigator's Office. (505) 272-3053.

DO NOT GIVE THE NEXT OF KIN THE OMI INVESTIGATOR'S CELL PHONE NUMBER. The only exception to this is if the investigator asks you to.

Once the notification process is complete, the officer will then provide the name of the next of kin and phone number to the OMI Field Deputy Investigator. The next of kin will receive additional information from OMI such as, autopsy dates, transport dates to a preferred funeral home, and other important information.